

ROSEMARY J. CLEARY AND
EVE ALLEGRA RAIMON

Whose “Greater Expectations” Are They, Anyway?

Exposing the Tensions within the Rhetoric of Educational Reform

FEATURED TOPIC

What does the vision of the “New Academy” look like when it is put into practice at an actual institution?

IMAGINE YOU ARE GIVEN *carte blanche* to re-configure a free-standing college campus of a large public university according to your own structural ideal for higher education, and that

you take as your conceptual model the vision of the “New Academy” outlined in *Greater Expectations*, the 2002 report of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). Physically, the space would be open and inviting; it might even include an art gallery in its spacious lobby to encourage and showcase “the human imagination, expression, and the products of many cultures” (xii). The boldest and most substantive innovation in this utopian model, however, would be the total eschewal of the traditional, discipline-specific, departmental system of organization, which “reinforces the atomization of the curriculum by dividing knowledge into distinct fields, even though scholarship, learning, and life have no such artificial boundaries” (16). In its place, you would establish interdisciplinary programs that deliberately confound conventional distinctions among the professions and the liberal arts. You would recruit a faculty of generalists committed to interdisciplinary

teaching and scholarship as well as to fostering empowered and intentional learners able to “draw on differences and commonality to produce a deeper experience of community” (22).

When most of us conjure such an ideal restructuring of the academy, we don’t imagine the setting to be an industrial park off a strip mall expanse of urban roadway. Yet that is precisely where you’ll find the University of Southern Maine’s Lewiston-Auburn College. In fact, to get there, you must pass Altered Image Tattoos at the Lewiston exit and take a left at Chick-A-Dee’s Restaurant. Turning into the parking lot across from the United Vending Company, you’ll see the main building, which, despite extensive renovations, remains squat-looking and low, reminding inhabitants of its initial use as indoor tennis courts. Housed in this setting, the college reflects the greater aspirations and firm commitments of this former manufacturing city to provide its young—and not-so-young—citizens the opportunity for just the sort of “inclusive educational excellence” AAC&U promotes in its Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative.

The “New Academy”

In 1988, civic and business leaders worked collaboratively with university representatives to establish a campus of the University of Southern Maine in the Lewiston-Auburn area, and they decided to build the new college on a solid foundation in the liberal arts. Rather than

ROSEMARY J. CLEARY is associate professor of social and behavioral sciences and director of the university honors program, and EVE ALLEGRA RAIMON is professor of arts and humanities, both at the University of Southern Maine’s Lewiston-Auburn College.



University of Southern Maine

establishing a curriculum focused myopically on professional preparation, they agreed on the importance of emphasizing critical thinking, written and oral communication, and an orientation toward lifelong learning that would enrich students' professional, personal, and civic lives well beyond their first—or next—jobs. Since its inception, Lewiston-Auburn College's mission has been to offer a curriculum "marked by integration between the liberal arts disciplines; between the liberal arts, the professional concentrations and the workplace; and between the college and the community" (Lewiston-Auburn College University of Southern Maine 2007). In their decision to provide what the LEAP report describes as "the kind of life-enhancing, liberal—and liberating—education that once was available only to the fortunate few" (AAC&U 2007, viii), the founders of Lewiston-Auburn College anticipated many aspects of the "New Academy" that now guide curricular reform at all three campuses of the University of Southern Maine.

Conceptually, the "New Academy" emerges from higher education reforms that address the "multiple purposes of higher learning in a complex society" and attempts to "bring together the divergent expectations" of students, employers, policymakers, faculty, and the general public (AAC&U 2002, 9). As friendly yet probing faculty of this "New Academy," we seek in this article to draw attention to the tensions concealed by the salutary rhetoric in AAC&U's calls for educational reform. We juxtapose an account of our experiences in curricular reform with an analysis that problematizes the rhetoric of AAC&U documents. What, we ask, does the vision of the "New Academy" look like when it is put into practice at an actual institution? What pedagogical advances are made, and what difficulties are intensified? Even at a college like ours—whose mission is to help aspiring students achieve the "greater expectations" set by their own community and where we collaborate with and enjoy strong support from business and civic leaders—it is necessary, productive, and healthy to heighten recognition of the differing and often competing interests, values, and expectations of our constituents and to engage those differences thoughtfully.

To frame the tensions we seek to scrutinize, we borrow the phrase "market-smart and mission-centered" from the subtitle of Robert

Zemsky, Gregory Wegner, and William Massy's *Remaking the American University* (2005). This contradictory formulation, which aptly summarizes AAC&U's rhetorical lexicon, is rooted in the belief that the academy can hold to its traditional mission of serving the common good while also functioning as a key player in the neoliberal market. Unlike those who consider the ideology of the market to pose the single-greatest threat to the future of American education (Washburn 2005; Caffentzis 2008; Readings 1997), AAC&U endeavors to bring together the divergent stakeholders in higher education. While we applaud AAC&U for its vitally important leadership, we advocate reflective critique of these terms.

As Washburn (2005, 39) reminds us, when John Dewey and other educational leaders created the American Association of University Professors in 1915, their aim was to gain legal protections for the academic freedom of faculty and to establish the academy as a rare space in American society where intellectuals could express views that challenge the status quo and question the moral legitimacy of certain business practices. While these larger issues remain of serious concern, they are not central to our focus on the curricular reform efforts advocated by AAC&U. Nonetheless, they should be kept in mind as we explore the potential effects of the AAC&U's efforts to integrate the market and the academy—two interpenetrated yet still separate spheres.

The Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative rests on AAC&U's finding that consensus exists among business, civic, and educational leaders regarding the "essential learning outcomes" of college. In other words, what parents, policymakers, legislators, and employers want students to gain from college is essentially the same as the knowledge, skills, and abilities that faculty intend for them. To establish such consensus, AAC&U has had to urge faculty to define student learning outcomes clearly and to find effective ways to assess them. AAC&U has taken the position that when colleges and universities respond to public demands for greater transparency and accountability they do not—as Bill Readings (1997) and others have argued—succumb to the accounting logic of consumer capitalism. Instead, assessment operates as a stratagem to forestall federal

intervention that would parallel No Child Left Behind at the university level. Further, for AAC&U, the definition and assessment of student learning outcomes function as a way for the academy to maintain its autonomy, to resist the logic of the marketplace, and to transform the terms by which the public mission of the academy is evaluated and reaffirmed.

Curricular reform at Lewiston-Auburn College

In terms of the transformative curricular reforms advocated by AAC&U, the undergraduate curriculum at the University of Southern Maine's Lewiston-Auburn College is an exemplar. Given the academic and political pressures for more explicit curricular "outcomes," we began our work by intentionally revisiting the core values of a liberal education. We were guided by the common purpose to educate our students more effectively to take up the "unfinished work of building a successful, inclusive democracy" (University of Maine System 2000). Working with colleagues across the university to articulate a common vision of what the goals of a liberal education could and should be, we produced a document listing the multiple literacies expected of college graduates in the twenty-first century as well as goals pertaining to ethical citizenship, social responsibility, and civic engagement. The curricular plan we developed based on these learning outcomes represents, in the words of AAC&U Senior Scholar Lee Knefelkamp (2007), "a statement of the civic mission of the college." Thus, in our experience, designing an outcomes-based curriculum has been a way to reaffirm the civic purpose of a college education. By making the intended learning more explicit, the "New Academy" articulates the specific ways it upholds its historical role of promoting the health of our democracy.

At the same time, however, as the curriculum committee began to translate the vision of liberal education into specific curricular themes and models, our commitment to serious, respectful dialogue and collaboration was repeatedly put to the test. Fundamental questions and differences emerged as we attempted to work out the details of a curriculum designed to "reach beyond the classroom to the larger

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community" and to ask students to "apply their developing analytical skills and ethical judgment to concrete problems in the world around them" (AAC&U 2002, 26).

Such enduring topics as environmental sustainability,

democracy and difference, and social and economic justice became the themes of our new general education curriculum. As they do everywhere, these vexing concerns quickly became highly politicized and hotly contested among our faculty. We grappled with differing disciplinary and philosophical positions, with questions of academic freedom, and with concerns about the pedagogies appropriate to the work of encouraging critical inquiry and ethically informed action. This work provided an indispensable and authentic lesson in our



need to practice the habits of mind and heart necessary to the inclusive democratic practices we hope to teach our students.

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The new core curriculum at Lewiston-Auburn College embodies many of the seven "Principles of Excellence" foregrounded in *College Learning for the New Global Century*, the 2007 LEAP report. Principle Four, for example, calls on schools to "engage the big questions," which is exactly what our four curricular themes are meant to accomplish. However, what our faculty found in the process of constructing this new core is that AAC&U's discourse quickly begs a lot of questions itself: Which "big questions" do we tackle? Engage them how?

The process of curricular reform, we discovered, cannot make much progress without first airing our own differences on such global issues—an undertaking that can lead, in turn, to contentious debate over which pedagogies should be employed to entertain the questions that are ultimately selected for examination.

Indeed, the very title of the core curriculum produced the inquiry, “How, Then, Shall We Live?” Even in our college’s literature, each theme is accompanied by a question. For the theme of “sustainability,” for example, we ask, “in a world where there are never enough resources to do all that we might want, how do we live and make decisions in a just and ethical way?” Many on our faculty maintain that raising such “big questions” inevitably and rightfully leads to a form of “advocacy teaching” that might challenge the norms and ideologies of American possessive individualism. Pedagogically, such “advocacy teaching” requires an interrogative mode that does not shrink from guiding students toward making observations that may be critical of existing social or market practices.

Thus, when AAC&U advocates for “an invigorated and practical liberal education as the most powerful form of learning for the twenty-first century” (2002, ix), we must ask what is behind such rhetoric. The effect is an invitation not only to raise the “big questions,” but also to provide critiques that will necessarily depart from outcomes aimed directly at producing students committed solely to advancing “economic vitality” and “individual opportunity” (AAC&U 2007, 4). While we suspect that precisely this pedagogical outcome is anticipated—and even considered desirable—by the AAC&U leadership, its rhetoric nonetheless remains coy about making clear political commitments.

Cross purposes

Two related elements in AAC&U discourse warrant further consideration, namely the oft-repeated references to “essential learning outcomes” and to “what really matters in college.” These phrases cover the divergence between what students expect to gain from their college education and what the faculty of the

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“New Academy” intend for them. As we all know, what “really matters” to students is that their education enable them to land a good job and advance in their careers after graduation. Obtaining a college degree is generally considered an investment necessary for financial security and personal advancement. As such, outcomes related to social re-

sponsibility, civic engagement, and global awareness are low on the list of student priorities, while critical thinking, communication skills, and competency in math and science are held to be of moderate importance. That is, students’ priorities tend to be the inverse of those of academic, civic, and business leaders (Humphreys and Davenport 2005). To address this divide, AAC&U recommends helping students and their parents understand “what really matters in college.”

AAC&U believes that this statistical discrepancy establishes the need for the “New Academy” to be “market-smart”: the LEAP report explains that the designated set of learning outcomes are “essential” because “in an economy fueled by innovation, the capabilities developed through a liberal education have become America’s most valuable economic asset” (2007, 13). Similarly, in Lewiston-Auburn College’s own marketing materials, we confidently assure our students that the skills and abilities they will hone will help them get a job and further their careers. We recruit students with the promise of upward mobility and then—in a fairly undisguised “bait-and-switch” maneuver—entice them into an educational experience that intends to upend their previously cherished priorities. We attract students to our programs with the promise of marketability, but we hope that their actual learning will encourage them to question the very notion of marketability itself. To be sure, we are all in favor of student success in the workplace; but we also hope, in the pedagogical spirit of Paulo Freire, that our graduates will leave with the ability to critique “the logic of the present system” even as they enter into it. Only then can higher education serve out Freire’s vision of a “practice of freedom” that affords younger generations the intellectual capacities to transform the more malevolent

practices and values of capitalism (Shaull 2000, 39).

Our purpose here is not to scold AAC&U for its rhetorical capitulation to the ideology of the marketplace. On the contrary, we maintain that the effort to help the general public understand what “really” matters in college contains within it a progressivist agenda to conserve the academy’s traditionally oppositional calling. Indeed, when AAC&U and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (2008) assert that “higher education has an obligation to our democracy as well as our economy,” it’s clear that the liberal education envisioned by AAC&U runs counter to the “competing curriculum” of global consumer capitalism. However, when it foregrounds a perceived seamlessness in the student outcomes desired by business, civic, and education leaders, AAC&U undermines the unique and historical role the academy has played in providing a countercultural voice.

We appreciate the political exigencies under which AAC&U operates. Nonetheless, we contend that without clearer delineation of the conflicting ethical implications of learning outcomes, we risk the loss of autonomy. As Toni Morrison warns (2000, 7), “if the university does not take seriously and rigorously its role as guardian of wider civic freedoms, as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems, as servant and preserver of deeper democratic practices, then some regime or ménage of regimes will do it for us, in spite of us, and without us.” Indeed, we need only look to the 2006 report of U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education for evidence that such a usurpation of academic autonomy is well underway already.

As we endeavor to assess the learning of our graduating students at Lewiston-Auburn College, we share the sentiments of a single mother working her way out of poverty, who, like many of our students, was the first in her family to earn a college degree: “One of the wonderful things about America is that we’re continually making progress, and we make progress because we continue to question the way things are now” (Bazar 2006). Such convictions, however innocent, reflect a dual disposition and a transgressive role for higher education. On the one hand, students remain hopeful about a progressive narrative for

the country’s future; on the other, they believe that meaningful and continuous civic transformation is essential for that progressive narrative to be realized. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the authors’ names on the subject line.

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